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U.S. INTELLIGENCE OFFICERS TOLERATED RIGHTS ABUSES - OFFICIALS

By Anne-Marie O'Connor

TEGUCIGALPA, Feb 13, Reuter - U.S. intelligence agents knew that Honduran commando squads trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) were killing and torturing people suspected of helping Salvadoran rebels obtain arms, but did nothing about it, top Honduran and U.S. officials say.

They said the Honduran troops were participating in a CIA-funded program to halt the arms flow to the Salvadoran rebels.

In addition to those who were murdered and tortured, more than a hundred others "disappeared," the officials said.

Senior Honduran military officers and U.S. intelligence officials who formerly served in Honduras said that U.S. intelligence operatives knew of the murders and torturing but never exerted pressure to end the abuses, considering them an internal matter.

One U.S. military intelligence officer formerly involved in the program said that one of the major problems in providing evidence of gun-running was that Honduran operatives sometimes killed their victims or they simply "disappeared."

He said that in the province of Choluteca, strategically located between Nicaragua and El Salvador, Nicaraguans and Salvadorans and Hondurans were detained on suspicion of running arms and then were "gone, disappeared."

"We were not thrilled," he said. "The subversives kept ending up dead. They were never captured alive."

He said U.S. intelligence operatives "may have been somewhat neglectful" by not asking the Hondurans about such incidents but said Congress required them to maintain distance from the program and they were afraid of being accused of meddling in Honduran affairs.

"Understand our position," he said. "If we come up with something on a Honduran officer and we're wrong, it creates a lot of tensions counterproductive to our purpose."

"And if we're right, we have to ask ourselves if this is not an internal matter for the Hondurans," he said.

A Pentagon officer said that the Defense Department, alarmed by reports of such abuses in the press, ordered an investigation a year ago which turned up evidence that U.S.-trained units were guilty of some of the charges.

U.S. Embassy spokesman Michael O'Brien refused to confirm or deny whether such an investigation had been carried out, saying he could not comment on intelligence matters.

"There is no connection between specific professional training which may have been provided by the U.S. government to Honduran security forces and charges that Honduran security personell may have subsequently engaged in improper activities," he said.

"At no time has there been any U.S. government involvement in

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death squad activities.'

President Reagan cited alleged arms trafficking from Nicaragua to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador in approving \$19 million in aid for Nicaraguan rebels in 1981.

He is currently pressing a request for Congress to authorize \$54 million in urgent supplemental assistance to train and equip local police and military forces to fight terrorism in El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Panama.

CIA spokeswoman Patti Volz said she could not comment on 'alleged programs of arms interdiction.'

Sources said the program was begun in Honduras in late 1981 by CIA officials who recruited a corps of low-level Honduran officers already involved in intelligence work.

The watchdog Honduran Human Rights Commission recorded 112 people as having disappeared and another 85 murdered from late 1981 until military chief Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez was deposed by junior officers in a 1984 coup.

Alvarez' successor, Brig. Gen. Walter Lopez, disbanded the leadership of the squads.

In 1985 the Human Rights Commission reported only five missing Hondurans.

Human rights group head Ramon Custodio credits Honduran para-military squads for the disappearances and killings but blames the United States 'for bringing to Honduras blind, Argentinian-style anti-communism, at whatever the human and social cost.'

Members of the Salvadoran guerrilla Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) have said in interviews that their Honduran support structure was severely weakened by the crackdown and family members of those who disappeared in Honduras have privately admitted that their missing relatives were involved in FMLN support.

The U.S. Embassy under U.S. Ambassador John Negroponte consistently denied there was a significant human rights problem in Honduras.

Shortly after leftist labor leader Rolando Vindel was picked up at his home by Honduran intelligence operatives in March 1984, the U.S. embassy told reporters the embassy's labor attache would not press the government for his release.

He was a communist, an unsavoury character,' the U.S. embassy labor attache said, explaining lack of U.S. interest in the case.

Vindel was held and interrogated until the Alvarez coup and killed in the four days before Lopez took power, according to senior Honduran officers and another senior U.S. official no longer in Honduras.

A senior Honduran official said none of the Honduran officers involved in the squads at the time would be charged with any crime because 'it was not their fault. They were under orders to fight communism.'